

THE PHILIPPI GERMAN AGRICULTURAL ASSOCIATION – 125 YEARS OF ORGANISED AGRICULTURE ON THE CAPE FLATS

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Die Philippi Duitse Landbouvereniging – 125 jaar georganiseerde landbou op die Kaapse Vlakte

Die Philippi-landbouvereniging, een van Suid-Afrika se oudste landbouverenigings, het in 2010 sy 125ste bestaansjaar gevier. Die landbouvereniging van Philippi, die Wes-Kaap se “groentespens”, is in 1885 gestig om die ongunstige toestande te verbeter waaronder die Duitse immigrantegemeenskap hulle op die sanderige en moerasagtige Kaapse Vlakte bevind het. Die belangrikste oogmerk was om as drukgroep te verseker dat begaanbare paaie na en in die gebied gebou word en om gemeenskaplike landbou-aktiwiteite te ontwikkel. Hierdie artikel bied ’n historiese oorsig oor die ontstaan van die vereniging en sy eerste mylpale en eindig met ’n blik op die toekoms, aangesien die voortbestaan van die gebied deur stedelike indringing bedreig word en, soos in ander landelike gebiede, hoë vlakke van misdaad. Deurlopend word die belangrikheid van die rol van georganiseerde landbou beklemtoon om ’n gesonde, volhoubare landbousektor op plaaslike en wyer grondslag te verseker.

Slutelwoorde: akkerbou, Duitse immigrante, georganiseerde landbou, landbou, landbouvereniging, Philippi, volhoubaarheid.

The Philippi Agricultural Association, one of South Africa’s oldest agricultural associations, celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2010. This association of Philippi, the Western Cape’s “Vegetable Pantry”, was established in 1885 to improve the unfavourable conditions under which the German immigrants had to farm on the sandy and marshy Cape Flats. It acted as a lobby group to build roads to and within the area, and to promote the development of agricultural activities within the community. This article presents an historical overview of the establishment of the association and ends with an assessment of the future, as the survival of the area is threatened by urban encroachment, and, as in other rural areas, by high levels of crime. The role of organised agriculture to ensure a healthy, sustainable agricultural sector, locally and in a wider sense, is continuously emphasised.

Keywords: agricultural association, agriculture, German immigrants, horticulture, organised agriculture, Philippi, sustainability.

Introduction

The agricultural association in Philippi, originally the Cape Flats and Districts Agricultural Association, now the Cape Flats Agricultural Association, celebrated its 125th anniversary in September 2010. It is one of the oldest, if currently not the oldest, existing agricultural associations in South Africa. It was established in 1885 by the German immigrants (individuals from around 1860, plus group immigration up to 1883) to the Philippi Flats in the Western Cape.¹ These Germans were specifically targeted by the British colonial government in the mid to late 1800s to immigrate to the Western Cape to bolster its European population and to produce vegetables for the growing population at the Cape.

The construct “Cape Flats” has a notorious connotation today, due to the high levels of crime and violence, a legacy of the apartheid government’s development of townships in the area in terms of its segregation policy.² Parts of the agricultural area cultivated by the Germans in the 19th century were expropriated in the 1960s for township development by the Nationalist government (this will be referred to in the last section of this article).³

A lesser known fact is that the introduction of organised agriculture in this area left a legacy for others to build on, because the agricultural association established in the 1880s by the German immigrants, led to the first attempts of organised agriculture in the Western Cape.

This descriptive article explores the origins of the Philippi agricultural association and some of its accomplishments. First, the settlement of the Cape Flats will be placed within historical context provided, after which the arrival, settlement and challenges of the German immigrants to the area will be discussed. The first

¹ L. Rabe, *’n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi op die Kaapse Vlakte* (D.Phil. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1994); as well as articles on various aspects on this community: L. Rabe, *Taal as identiteit – die ‘Duitse’ Afrikaanssprekende gemeenskap Philippi*, *South African Journal of Cultural History* 17(2), 2003; *So jung sehen wir uns nimmer wieder – Segswyses as uitdrukking van identiteit in die Lutherse setlaarsgemeenskap by Philippi*, *SAJCH* 19(2), 2005; *Certain milestones in the history of the Lutheran congregations of the German immigrants to Philippi Flats 1877–2007*, *SAJCH* 21(2), 2007; *Treu Deutsch Allewege! – Cultural identity and the ‘German’ community of Philippi*, *SAJCH* 22(2), 2008; *The ‘Bauernmission’ and the ironies of colonialism: the religio-cultural legacy of the ‘Bauernsiedlung’ Philippi*, *SAJCH*, 23(2), 2009.

² L. Rabe, *’n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), pp. 599-602; L. Rabe, *Bete und Arbeite*. *The Philippi Germans and their story* (Somerset West, 2010), p. 1.

³ See L. Rabe, *’n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994); L. Rabe, *Bete und Arbeite*. *The Philippi Germans and their story* (2010).

achievements, such as the first agricultural exhibition, will be described in more detail. The article will conclude with the views of current role-players regarding the sustainability of the area as food resource for the Western Cape.

The author applies historical-descriptive methodologies in an attempt to reconstruct the past and the chronology of events. A variety of documentary records, primary sources (historical documents, reports and interviews) as well as secondary records (books and studies) were used to collect data.⁴ As is the approach in cultural historical research, several primary and secondary sources were explored.

Following the historical context of German immigration to the Cape, reference to other agricultural associations will be briefly outlined. The term “organised agriculture” for the purposes of this article is explained according to an applicable 1925 definition of “group action and class interest.”⁵ The establishment of the agricultural association not only introduced the concept of organised agriculture to the Cape, but is also one of the factors why this area, despite various challenges throughout the decades, can still fulfil its original purpose for which the founders were recruited, namely to provide the Cape with fresh produce.

Historical context

The Cape Flats were not populated before the mid nineteenth Century, due to it being inhospitable to the extreme: seemingly infertile sandy soil, coupled with unbearable winds in summer, and in winter, marshlands, with big areas below the waterline. Still, the then minister of Crown Lands, John X Merriman, specifically wanted to see this area being cultivated, as it was in close proximity to Cape Town, and the growing city was in dire need of fresh produce.

The earlier settlements of German agricultural immigrants to the Eastern Cape had been regarded a success, which led to the decision to lure more Germans to the Western Cape. The immigrants to the Eastern Cape proved that families could exist on small portions of land.⁶ Merriman, on his journeys to the Eastern Cape, was “surprised” to find “prospering”⁷ German towns. Apparently, he said “If German settlers could change a stone desert into a paradise [...], why not also a sand desert?”⁸

⁴ J. Mouton, *How to succeed in your Master's & Doctoral studies* (Pretoria, 2001), pp. 105; 107; 170-171; G.M. du Plooy, *Introduction to communication* (Kenwyn, 1997), pp. 87-103.

⁵ G.A. Fox, The platform for organized agriculture, *Journal of Farm Economics* 7(1), 1925, p. 22.

⁶ E.L.G. Schnell, *For men must work* (Grahamstown, 1954), p. 201.

⁷ W.H.C. Hellberg, Duitse Immigrasie na Wes-Kaapland, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünensand* (Wynberg, 1959), p. 16.

⁸ W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünensand* (1959), p. 16.

Ironically, the Cape, founded as halfway station to supply fresh produce to passing ships, could, after two centuries, and with its growing population in the late 1800s, still not be self-sufficient with regards to fresh produce. Henceforth the Cape Colonial Government's need to recruit vegetable farmers.

The British Colonial Government found willing immigrants among the working class peasants and day labourers of Northern Germany who were persuaded to immigrate to the Cape. These peasants volunteered in the belief that they would be in charge of their own destiny in the new country and not subject to the whims of landowners. During the recruitment they were shown photographs of what later turned out to be Constantia.⁹ A road infrastructure as well as a school where their children would be educated in German, were also promised.¹⁰ It has been said that these immigrants came with nothing but “energy, will, industry and Lutheran faith”¹¹ – as it was also put: “their two hands and the Lutheran Bible.”

It was these immigrants who created a vegetable garden from barren sand, regarded as a semi-desert, in the then Wynberg and Claremont Flats, as these parts of the Cape Flats were known at the time, and which later would become known as the Philippi Flats.

The Cape's “Vegetable Pantry”¹² eventually did flourish, but only after years of setbacks and hardships – tales on which the immigrants' descendants were raised and which inculcated an unsurpassable work ethic in each succeeding generation.¹³ In short, the German immigrants came to the Cape with few possessions, in most cases with almost no cash, began as subsistence farmers, and gradually developed into commercial farmers, to the point where every new innovation in the field of modern horticultural computerised practices are used by the current generation of farmers. Despite the disillusionment with what had been promised, and the reality – the lack of infrastructure, the sandy soil, the windy conditions, the marshes in winter and desert in summer – the Germans had no choice. They did not have the means to go back, nor the means to start with anything else. They just had to remain and attempt to make a living through agriculture.¹⁴

⁹ Personal communication: Mrs. I. Bode & Ms Fidi Schultz, Bellville, 1992.

¹⁰ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), pp. 11 & 68, 76-77.

¹¹ Die ersten Anfänge in der Vlakte, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünenand* (1959), p. 13.

¹² The name by which the area became known in the twentieth century, and how it was referred to in numerous newspaper reports.

¹³ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), pp. 586-595.

¹⁴ W.H.C. Hellberg, Duitse Immigrasie na Wes-Kaapland, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünenand* (1959), pp. 16-17.

One researcher described the first hardships as follows:

“At first the work was difficult and disappointing, their initial attempts failed lamentably. All their experience in Germany availed them nothing, here they had to begin learning afresh [this refers to a different climate, different agricultural conditions and different produce].”¹⁵

The eventual success of this agricultural community can be attributed largely to the establishment of the agricultural association and its approach of organised agriculture, which the immigrants founded shortly after the arrival of the last group of immigrants.¹⁶

Thanks to the association’s lobbying power, they could improve their circumstances and could prosper collectively.¹⁷ As early as the 1890s members collectively imported a Friesian bull from the Netherlands to improve the quality of their livestock, as well as better seed potatoes to improve harvests. They also organised the first agricultural show in 1892 – not only to encourage mutual competition, but also to showcase German diligence.

South African agri-historical context

Some claim the association to be the oldest in South Africa, but it might be more correct to consider it the oldest in the Western Cape. One source declares without any measure of doubt that the Philippi association is the oldest in South Africa.¹⁸ Yet, as far as this researcher could establish, it will be more accurate to state that it is probably the oldest in the Western Cape. Despite various enquiries¹⁹ it could not be established whether other associations are older than that of Philippi.

The oldest association used to be in the Eastern Cape, and was also founded by German immigrants. This association, the Kei Road Association, was regarded as the oldest in South Africa, and was founded in 1857,²⁰ ten months after the arrival of the German military settlers in that region.²¹

According to information, it ceased to exist when the area was expropriated to establish the homeland of Ciskei according to the Homeland policy of the Nationalist

¹⁵ E.L.G. Schnell, *For men must work* (1954), p. 225.

¹⁶ W.J.L. Blumer, *Der Chronist berichtet*, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünensand* (1959), p. 23.

¹⁷ L. Rabe, *Kaapse Vlakte- en Distrik-Boerevereniging* (Cape Town, 1985), p. 3.

¹⁸ W.J.L. Blumer, *Der Chronist berichtet*, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünensand* (1959), p. 23.

¹⁹ Personal communication: Ms. P. Adams, AgriWestern Cape, 2010 (emails).

²⁰ L. Rabe, *Kaapse Vlakte- en Distrik-Boerevereniging* (Cape Town, 1985), p. 3.

²¹ W.H.C. Hellberg, *Die Deutschen Siedlungen in Südafrika seit der Mitte des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (D.Litt. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1954), p. 231.

Government. Another three German associations in the Eastern Cape were older than one hundred years when the Philippi association celebrated its centenary in 1985.²² Despite enquiries through organised agricultural bodies as well as internet searches, it could not be established whether they still exist.²³

In current KwaZulu-Natal, where German immigrants also settled in groups, there are agricultural associations that were older than one hundred years in 1985.²⁴ Despite various searches, it could not be established whether these associations still exist as independent associations.

The Cape Flats and Districts Agricultural Association

The *raison d'être* for the German immigrants in Philippi was to provide the Cape with fresh produce. The labour issue that might have arisen in other areas and industries posed no problem to these newcomers to the Cape: they were their own labour force – all of them: women, men and children.²⁵

According to a newspaper report about a month before the official establishment of the agricultural association in 1885, it was suggested by the colonial government that the Cape Flats would be suitable for the production of cotton.²⁶ Free seed was available to the German immigrants (as was also the case with the Port Jackson trees, planted to stabilise the sand).

This project, however, never succeeded. The unsuccessful attempts earlier by the “Baumwoll-Deutschen” in Natal²⁷ could not really have been known in the Cape. It seems not a single cottonseed was planted, as no descendant during research carried out in the 1980s could remember learning of this enterprise from their forebears.²⁸

Another agricultural attempt, however, met with far greater success. This was the establishment of the “Deutscher Landwirtschaftlicher Verein” – German Agricultural Association. The date of establishment is given as 12 September 1885. No proof could be found of the date, except for mention made in 1954 by Hellberg, a well-known scholar on German immigration,²⁹ and in 1959 by the formidable Pastor

²² L. Rabe, *Kaapse Vlakte- en Distrik-Boerevereniging* (Cape Town, 1985), p. 3.

²³ E-mails to Ms. Porchia Adams, AgriWestern Cape, 2010.

²⁴ L. Rabe, *Kaapse Vlakte- en Distrik-Boerevereniging* (1985), p. 3.

²⁵ W.H.C. Hellberg, Duitse immigrasie na Wes-Kaapland, in W.J.L. Blumer's *Pflanzgarten im Dünenand* (1959), p. 18.

²⁶ Für unsere Landsleute in den Flats. Baumwollenbau, *Das Capland*, 1885-08-15, p. 3.

²⁷ L. Rabe, 'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi (1994), p. 3.

²⁸ L. Rabe, 'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi (1994), p. 90.

²⁹ W.H.C. Hellberg, *Die Deutschen Siedlungen in Südafrika* (1954), p. 231.

Wilhelm Blumer, in his chronicle of the history of the community.³⁰ Whether their assumptions are based on historical evidence or on oral history, are uncertain. Still, Blumer proclaims without any doubt:

“On 12.9.1885 German agricultural association founded by Fritz Hörstmann in Philippi Flats – first ever agricultural association in South Africa.”³¹

Hellberg accepts that the association was established before the letter by Hörstmann was published on 12 September in *Das Capland*.³² According to him, Hörstmann, on numerous occasions, called on his compatriots to become members of such an association. He urged them on, saying that they would be able to act as a pressure group to improve conditions on the Flats.³³

Hörstmann’s letter dated 5 September was the only piece of evidence which indicated that the Germans gathered at Philippi on 12 September 1885. From this Blumer might have assumed the founding date as the 12th. One can hypothesise that the Germans came together on its publication date, the 12th, to put deed to word. The letter was published in the German newspaper *Das Capland* and called on compatriots countrywide to establish agricultural associations. Hörstmann, by recalling the “great success” of such associations in Germany, not only urged compatriots to establish such bodies, but also called on government to establish an agricultural ministry.³⁴

Despite Blumer’s acceptance that the association was the first in the entire South Africa, one can probably assume that it was the first in the Western Cape, as enquiries to establish whether there were any other associations older than that of Philippi in the Western Cape did not yield any results.³⁵

It can also be surmised that Hörstmann founded the association before 12 September, because in his letter he encourages all Germans in South Africa to follow the example of the Philippi immigrants. According to Hellberg, the Philippi association proved “surprisingly quickly” that “unity gives strength” and that Hörstmann had urged other areas to follow suit to establish their rights.³⁶

The letter by Hörstmann is proof of how informed the immigrants were, even though they were not highly schooled and were regarded by the colonial government

³⁰ W.J.L. Blumer, Der Chronist berichtet, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünensand* (1959), p. 23.

³¹ Original: Am 12.9.1885 Deutscher landwirtschaftlicher Verein von Fritz Hörstmann in Philippi-Vlakte gegründet, – erster landwirtschaftlicher Verein Südafrikas überhaupt.

³² W.H.C. Hellberg, *Die Deutschen Siedlungen in Südafrika* (1954), p. 231.

³³ W.H.C. Hellberg, Von den deutschen Siedlern im Kapland, *Afrikanische Heimatkalender* (1954), p. 98.

³⁴ H.F. Hörstmann, Eingesandt, *Das Capland*, 1885-09-12, p. 3.

³⁵ Personal communication: Ms. P. Adams, AgriWestern Cape, 2010 (emails).

³⁶ W.H.C. Hellberg, *Die Deutschen Siedlungen in Südafrika* (1954), p. 232.

as peasants, members of the so-called “Bauern Mission”, under the influence of the Hermannsburg Missionary Society. Hörstmann not only argued for the establishment of agricultural associations countrywide, but went beyond that: he called for the establishment of an agricultural ministry. He also referred to the agricultural associations in Germany, and said that if one took them as example, the benefits for the local population would be immense. Hörstmann was not only the founder of one of the oldest agricultural associations in South Africa, but also its first chairperson.³⁷ The official name of the association was to be, in English, the “Cape Flats and Districts Agricultural Association”, and in Afrikaans, the “Kaapse Vlake en Distrikte Landbouvereniging”, generally referred to by the community as the “Farmers’ Association”, in later years “Boerevereniging.”³⁸

Initial agricultural activities on the Flats

In the beginning the small farming community had something of everything as soon as enough cash could be saved to buy the first chickens and livestock. It represented mixed farming in the truest sense: vegetables, fowls, pigs and cattle (the latter not for meat, but for dairy purposes). The immigrants even farmed with timber: the small stands of Port Jackson not only provided firewood to be sold in town and for own use, but was also used for a multitude of other purposes, such as bedding for cattle and as layers in baskets for the packaging of eggs. Even the bark was used for leather tannery.³⁹

In most cases, the men were employed in town during the week to earn ready cash (as artisans and handy men), while the women and children worked on the small farms. The first livestock to be bought was usually a cock and a couple of hens, to get the egg farming going.

A typical example of such a beginning is the Rautmann/Augustson family: they first worked as labourers on a farm near Somerset West before they moved to their allotted land on the Flats in 1886.⁴⁰ Arriving with “only 30 shillings” in 1883, when moving to their allotments on the Flats in 1886, they had “3 cows, 35 chickens, one dog, a cat and 3 pigs” (translated).

The beginning was tough. Everything was new – the seasons, the climate, the soil, even the insect plagues. A handy agricultural guidance book was the “Volkskalender”, the first edition published in 1887, its aim being to give guidance to

³⁷ W.J.L. Blumer, Der Chronist berichtet, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünen sand* (1959), p. 23.

³⁸ Personal communication: Mrs. I. Bode, Bellville, 1992; Mr. A.C.U. Hörstmann, Somerset West, 2010.

³⁹ L. Rabe, *Bete und Arbeite*. *The Philippi Germans and their story* (Somerset West, 2010), p. 109.

⁴⁰ J.G. Augustson, Personal Memoir (1950), p. 14.

the German farmers.⁴¹ It carried information on agriculture, climate, season, rainfall and other useful advice.

The biggest stumbling block for agriculture on the Flats was water. In summer, not enough; in winter, too much. The digging of wells – something obvious, yet not undertaken before the Germans' arrival – solved the problem to some extent.⁴²

As time passed, the immigrants got to know the seasons, soil and climatic circumstances. An essential requirement for survival was to have two types of land: one for summer – lower lying vleis; and one for winter – higher lying areas.⁴³

In 1887 Hörstmann received the long-awaited prize for the best stand of Port Jacksons. According to one source, it was for the “most Port Jacksons on his property”,⁴⁴ another for the “most beautiful stand of Port Jacksons”,⁴⁵ and a third indicated that the prize was awarded for two specific trees.⁴⁶

It was clear that with every bit of cash in hand, the immigrants improved their circumstances. They started to buy implements and stock. Agriculture on the desolate sand flats developed slowly but surely. In the beginning, after they had succeeded in producing a small harvest, they walked through the thick sand with bags of vegetables on their shoulders to the suburbs where they would hawk their produce from door to door.⁴⁷ Later, vegetables were supplemented with chickens, eggs and butter, and so they progressed to acquiring a small cart, first pulled by themselves, then a draft-horse, and ultimately a cart drawn by two horses.

More development

The general prosperity of the community as a whole, however, would only grow after the establishment of the agricultural association to act as a lobby to improve access roads to the area – a prerequisite for development and growth. This was one of its first goals.

Roads to and within the settlement area was one of the promises made by the recruiting firm in Germany, yet not kept.⁴⁸ (The same applied to the promise of a

⁴¹ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p. 119.

⁴² L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p. 100.

⁴³ A. Bouwer, Hul spore in die sand, hul grootste monument, *Sarie*, 1954-05-04, p. 17.

⁴⁴ A. Bouwer, Hul spore in die sand, hul grootste monument, *Sarie*, 1954-05-04, p. 17.

⁴⁵ A. Visser, *Duinsand en vlei*. Unpublished paper presented as radio series (Cape Town, 1971), p. 39.

⁴⁶ H. Ludewig, *Geschichte der Deutschen Evangelische-Lutherischen St. Johannis-Gemeinde zu Wýnberg bei Kapstadt* (Braunschweig, 1911), p. 30.

⁴⁷ Groenteplase op seesand, *Die Landbouweekblad*, 1954-02-17, n.p.

⁴⁸ W.H.C. Hellberg, 'n Terugblik, in W.J.L. Blumer, *Pflanzgarten im Dünensand* (1959), p. 34.

school and education in the immigrants' mother tongue. The community built its own school, and except for a small subsidy later on, financed it themselves.)

Although, according to two sources, the agricultural association had already been founded in 1885, the first official documentary proof of the existence of the association was found in the *Südafrikanische Zeitung* of 28 January 1891.⁴⁹ According to this, the association was “officially” founded on 18 October 1890. This report refers to the “Deutscher Landwirtschaftl. Verein zu Wynberg”, with its members the “Cape Down wohnender und Landbau treibenden Deutschen.”⁵⁰ Its purpose was to establish an organisation “[i]n which the good and bad circumstances of these immigrants in the Cape Flats could be discussed.”⁵¹ It would also encourage its members to engage in healthy competition in order to improve their products and livestock.⁵²

The next report on the association, in February 1891, was about the “unnennbar schlechten Strassen” – the impossibly bad roads – leading from the suburbs of Cape Town to the area.⁵³ Apparently these roads were then improved by laying “sand-on-sand” roads, leading to the “Vor-Flats” – probably the first part of the Flats, close to Wynberg/Kenilworth.

Yet, these “sand-on-sand” roads proved to be ineffective and were replaced by gravel roads. Gravel had already been transported to a damaged bridge which was actually the entrance to the “Sand Eldorado”, as the Flats were called in this report.

Evidence was also found of the establishment of yet another association, founded in March 1891. This association was founded to allow English and “hollandische Mitcolonisten” (Dutch fellow colonialists) to become members.⁵⁴ A committee of five was commissioned to write its constitution. It was decided that an influential member of parliament had to be its chairperson. He was the Swede Ole Anders Ohlsson, pioneer of the beer industry in Newlands who came to the Cape in 1860.

According to the news report these two organisations merged, as the urgency of usable roads (“nachmenschlichen Begriffen”)⁵⁵ was the *raison d'être* for both. Meetings were held on Sundays. This, the public were assured, was purely a pragmatic decision in order to enable everyone to attend.

⁴⁹ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p.115.

⁵⁰ Translated: the Cape Flats' residing agricultural Germans.

⁵¹ Original: In welchem das Wohl und Weheebendiese Ansiedler in den Cape Downs besprochen werden könnte.

⁵² W.H.C. Hellberg, *Die Deutschen Siedlungen in Südafrika*, (1954), p. 232.

⁵³ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi*, (1994), p.116.

⁵⁴ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi*, (1994), p.116.

⁵⁵ Translation: according to human understanding.

In a letter to the *Südafrikanische Zeitung* dated April 1891, the dismal living conditions on the Flats were described as still serious:⁵⁶

“The people here on the Flats cannot live from horticulture alone; they have to go to the suburbs to look for better pay as an extra income in order to acquire livestock enables them to have a bigger income through the selling of milk and butter.”⁵⁷

The immigrants worked relentlessly towards getting the roads leading to the settlement in a “usable” condition and also appealed to the Divisional Council. They argued that the whole area would benefit and that Council property would increase in value.⁵⁸ Various deputations were sent to the minister of Public Works.⁵⁹

A petition concerning roads with 40 signatures attached, was, amongst others, handed to the minister of Public Works. This first petition was followed a month later by a second – this time with 200 signatures, including those of the mayor and town council of Wynberg.

Despite poor circumstances, the immigrants did their utmost to improve their living conditions and prospects. Visiting German scholars acted as the first occasional agricultural guidance officers⁶⁰ – yet another first by the German immigrants on the Flats. One such visitor was someone who “had a proper agricultural education” and who addressed the farming community on 22 July 1891 at 5 pm – in other words, at the end of the working day. In the short period he stayed at the Cape, he visited the area several times, and the immigrants were commanded to attend, as his address would be of “great interest”.⁶¹ Unfortunately, there was no follow-up report of what was said.

First agricultural show

Meanwhile, the immigrants managed to settle down. Their next important project was to organise the first agricultural exhibition. This was done not only to show the people of Cape Town what had been achieved on the Flats, but also to motivate one

⁵⁶ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p.117.

⁵⁷ Original: Die Leute können hier in der Vlakte unmöglich vom Ackerbau allein existieren; sie sind stets gezwungen, sich in den Dörfern oder der Stadt nach lohnender Nebenarbeit um zu sehen, falls sie nicht die Mittel haben, sich Vieh anzu schaffen, um durch Verkauf von Milch und Butter grössere Einnahme quellen zu erzielen.

⁵⁸ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p. 118.

⁵⁹ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p. 120.

⁶⁰ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p. 119.

⁶¹ L. Rabe, *'n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p. 119.

another.⁶² This increased the community's pride in proving their relative success, even if only to themselves.

For the very first exhibition in 1892 a representation of the immigrants went to see Colonial Secretary Sauer to get a grant to organise the event, planned for either March or April in 1892. At the same meeting it was confirmed that the Governor would open the exhibition.⁶³ Sauer himself donated a sum of money, as did the Government (£50), as well as some of the farmers' clientele, among them E. Burmester and the Harris Brothers. The exhibition was to be held on 7 April 1892. The day before, the *Südafrikanische Zeitung* gave a preview of what was to be expected:⁶⁴

“The prospects for tomorrow's agricultural exhibition are really very favourable. No fewer than 298 entries have been received. In cattle, vegetables and butter there will be stiff competition. For cheese and grapes, both still experimental on the Flats, there were also multiple entries. In general, all sections are well represented, and one can count on a very successful exhibition” (translated).

The exhibition was held in Claremont, and the fact that it was specifically a “German achievement” was celebrated. In the next edition of the newspaper, in a long report on the exhibition as well as on the prizegiving ceremony afterwards, the complete list of all the winners, in all categories, was published – also what the prizes were.⁶⁵

The governor, Sir Harry Loch, opened the exhibition shortly after eleven on April 7. The grounds surrounding the Claremont City Hall were transformed into show grounds to accommodate the cattle. The report said this section could not be compared to the display of fresh produce, as the immigrants were horticulturists, not cattle breeders. Especially the horses seemed to be “somewhat thin”.

According to the prize list, there were prizes for beans, “Bisam-melone” (probably cantaloupe), cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, cucumber, horse-radish, leeks, marrows, mealies, onions (red and white), parsley, parsnip, potato, pumpkin, sweet melon, sweet potato, tomato and turnip-cabbage. Other varieties were eggplant, kohlrabi, radishes, red cabbage and spinach. Varieties which are not known today, are “Pastinake” (a type of parsnip), “Schwarzwurz” (probably = wurzel, black salsify) and “Mangold” (chard).

The prizegiving ceremony was held the next Monday in the school in Philippi. On this occasion, the Minister for Home Affairs, Minister Innes, was the guest speaker.

⁶² W.H.C. Hellberg, *Die Deutschen Siedlungen in Südafrika* (1954), p. 232.

⁶³ Local-Nachrichten, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-02-03, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Die landwirtschaftliche Ausstellung unserer Vlaktefarmer, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-04-06, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Landwirtschaftliche Ausstellung der Vlaktefarmer, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-04-13, p. 3.

His speech, as was to be expected, mostly focused on the roads – or lack thereof. He said the Government considered the main roads its responsibility, and the byroads – in other words those to and within the settlement – that of the District Council. That is why he gave the instruction that £1000 should be used for this purpose – to which the editor of the newspaper felt obliged to comment in brackets (“which up to now has still not been utilised”).

The event was closed by the community’s “Seelsorger”, Pastor Wagener – as could be expected in a community whose slogan was “Bete und Arbeite”. According to the news report, he began his speech with “Liebe Landsleute, liebe Freunde!”⁶⁶

“From my heart I rejoice with all of you about the success with which you carried off this exhibition. You have shown, clearly and without any doubt, the population of this country, which became our second Heimat, that German thrift and German hard work, even under bitter conditions, can overcome and create something great. You have done a great deed, because these sandy Flats have become a flourishing garden – through your work” (translated).

As Pastor of his congregation, his final words also contained an admonishment:

“In the sweat of your brow you and your children have tamed this soil. For almost nine years I have been bound to you, shared in your joy and your sorrow. That is also why I am today in your midst, to celebrate with you, but also to ask you, and to admonish you: carry on in this way, but remain the old, simple German agriculturists you are, you and your children, and always strive to make these Flats an inhabitable area” (translated).

And then he ended with a blessing:

“I wish from the depth of my heart, that God will also bless you furthermore and for all times, these our so beloved German Flats” (translated).

This was greeted with a “stürmischer Jubel” (loud cheering).

The *Südafrikanische Zeitung* reported that the agricultural association’s annual meeting was held the following month in the school’s biggest classroom, which was also used as a hall for community events. There were between sixty and seventy members, and the most important issue on the agenda was, of course, roads.⁶⁷

One can deduce from the fact that the next meeting was held in the Lansdowne Hotel in Claremont that the farmers were now financially so secure as to treat

⁶⁶ Translated: Dear compatriots, dear friends!

⁶⁷ Landwirtschaftliche Ausstellung der Vlaktefarmer, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-05-25, p. 3.

themselves to a pint in a local pub.⁶⁸ But they still focused on their agenda: once again, it was the roads. This time they also discussed the possibility of importing a Friesian bull to improve their cattle. This they would do together, as the collective approach was always favoured among the farmers. This was not only because of the influence of Ludwig Harms, the founder of the Hermannsburg Missionary Society, and his friendship with Karl Marx (and therefore a communal approach to matters),⁶⁹ but also because the farmers knew from experience that standing together improved their chances of success.

It was decided that a circular would be sent out to ask how much each immigrant could contribute to import the animal, which would amount to £60.⁷⁰ A discussion followed to also import seed potatoes to improve their crops. It was decided that matters concerning the seed potatoes would be finalised when it was established what the needs of each farmer were.

Further evidence of the extent to which organised agriculture had a positive influence on the development of this sector was that a representative of the American company Loyds & Co got permission to demonstrate their plough, the “Cultivator”, at the next meeting. The last point on the agenda was that it was unanimously accepted that the next exhibition would take place in April 1893.

Furthermore: it transpires that the immigrants were now in a position to even show altruism. Despite their own quiet simple lifestyle, they could donate three guineas to a fund created as a result of a catastrophe in Mauritius – the report did not say what the nature of the disaster was.

A following *Südafrikanische Zeitung* reports about a railway for the Flats, which was welcomed by the immigrants as it would facilitate transport for them and their goods.⁷¹ In this report the word Philippi is used for the first time. Previously the area was referred to as the “Wynberg Flats” or “Claremont Flats”. It seems the station would be at the point in the Flats where the Dutch Reformed church of Wynberg held regular field services. Therefore, the theory that the name was derived from the Dutch Reformed minister Philip Faure, after whom Faure, also on the Cape Flats, was named, could be true. The theory by Blumer was that the immigrants named it Philippi after their love of horses and the biblical Philippi.⁷²

The immigrants were in favour of a railway from Wynberg to “Philippi”, and from there across the Flats to D’Urban Road (today Bellville). The immigrants were

⁶⁸ Landwirtschaftlicher Verein der Vlaktebauern, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-06-27, p. 3.

⁶⁹ L. Rabe, *Bete und Arbeite*. *The Philippi Germans and their story* (2010), p. 71.

⁷⁰ Landwirtschaftlicher Verein der Vlaktebauern, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-06-27, p. 3.

⁷¹ Einen eue Vlaktebahn, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-07-27, p. 3.

⁷² L. Rabe, *Bete und Arbeite*. *The Philippi Germans and their story* (2010), p. 72.

not only willing to donate land for this, but even to buy shares in the company.⁷³

Furthermore, it was requested that a market hall be built in Claremont, as there was a need for it. It was said that the population of Claremont was seven to eight thousand strong, which warranted such a development. A “wise person” at this meeting stood up and warned “vor einem Zuviel” – not to do too many things at once. Indeed, nothing came of the railway dream.

At the next meeting, held in the Philippi school, it was reported that minister Merriman increased the grant for the next year’s exhibition from £50 to £75, with the promise of £100 for the next year⁷⁴ – another indication of how organised agriculture contributed to development.

Vineyard dreams

Merriman also had other dreams for the Flats, namely to transform the whole area in a flourishing vineyard. It was therefore reported that a prize of £10 for the best 25 pounds of raisins – made of grapes grown on the Flats – would be awarded.⁷⁵

Merriman thought it would not be long before the Flats would be “dichtbesetzt” (densely planted) with vineyards. According to experts, the sandy soil would be unfavourable for the spread of the dreaded root fungus phylloxera (which had almost destroyed the Boland vineyards).

Also on the agenda was the railway line. All the immigrants, except one (perhaps the realist who cautioned against too many dreams?), once again said that they were willing to donate the necessary land free of charge. The market hall in Claremont and the seed potatoes – a substantial order to import on behalf of all the members – were dealt with.

The first successful vineyards, it seemed, were indeed planted, at least on one farm. The vineyards flourished, and hanepoot seemed to do exceptionally well, as well as hermitage. Wesner, one of the first immigrants, at that stage had 7 000 vines, and the feared phylloxera was not a factor. Also, during winter, some of his vineyards were under water for three months, and “it did not affect the vineyards.” He did well by selling table grapes rather than trying to make wine from his harvest.⁷⁶ This edition of the newspaper also reports on a German agronomist visiting various farms.

⁷³ Einen eue Vlaktebahn, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-07-27, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Unsere Vlakte-Bauern, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-09-21, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Unsere Vlakte-Bauern, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-09-21, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Aus der Vlakte, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-12-21, p. 3.

The lifespan of the “vineyard period” is uncertain, because during the 1980s none of the older descendants, at the time octogenarians, could remember that their grandparents had ever discussed the cultivation of grapes on the Flats.⁷⁷

In the same edition of the *Südafrikanische Zeitung* it was reported that the Government once again awarded prizes for the best stands of Port Jacksons. Potential entrants had to contact the forester to inspect their plantations.⁷⁸ For the government’s purposes, the only purpose for the trees – and to win a prize – was that it had to contain the driftsand. No further reports on this issue were published.

An epidemic, a drought and... war

With decent roads materializing, and the first successful exhibition behind them, the foundation for a prosperous late 1890s was laid – thanks to the collective efforts through the agricultural association.

But then, just as it seemed they were set for success, rinderpest broke out in 1896. Especially the farmers in the Dunes area, who specialised in cattle, suffered losses. At the same time, a hitherto unknown drought occurred.⁷⁹ Many immigrants had to start all over again. The next year, luckily, was a “good year” with a better harvest, but shortly afterwards they were obliged to submit their horses to the Colonial Government at give-away prices because of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899. Augustson recorded this setback:

“In October 1899 the Boer War broke out – it did not affect us, only that I lost £12 on a horse. Farmers had to bring all their horses to Wynberg where the soldiers selected horses. They took one of mine, which I had bought for £30, but for which I was paid only £18. That is the only thing I lost during the Boer War” (translated).⁸⁰

The nineteenth century came to its close. The immigrants had established themselves well enough to overcome both natural disasters such as an outbreak of an epidemic, a drought and even a man-made disaster such as a distant war for which they also had to make sacrifices. As a group they proved themselves by forming a lobby to achieve goals, such as the building of roads, or exhibiting their produce. Their agricultural

⁷⁷ L. Rabe, *’n Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi* (1994), p.128.

⁷⁸ Aus der Vlake, *Südafrikanische Zeitung*, 1892-12-21, p. 3.

⁷⁹ H. Ludewig, *Geschichte der Deutschen Evangelische-Lutherischen St. Johannis-Gemeinde zu Wynberg bei Kapstadt* (Braunschweig, 1911), p. 73.

⁸⁰ J.G. Augustson, *PersonalMemoir* (1950), p. 28.

association fulfilled its promise of achieving collective, communal progress, and even relative prosperity.

The next century

As could be expected with such a sound foundation in the last decade of the previous century, the agricultural association proved to be beneficial for its members throughout the twentieth century. E.g., during the Second World War (1939-1945), it was arranged that its members could obtain special permits for fuel and animal feed, crucial for their survival.⁸¹

Later, in the very difficult years in the 1960s, when descendants' property was unilaterally expropriated by the Nationalist Government to establish townships in terms of its Group Areas policy,⁸² the agricultural association also acted on behalf of its members. It sent numerous delegations, petitions and memoranda to relevant office bearers, including ministers. In 1969 the situation was so dire that a memorandum was sent to five ministers, the administrator of the Cape, the Cape Divisional Council and the City Council in attempts to save the agricultural area.⁸³ The German descendants, however, could not convince the authorities to change their plans for the development of townships on what was previously German settler property.

At the time of the association's centenary in 1985, which was celebrated at the German Hall in Philippi, membership counted 73, and the area produced 80 % of fresh produce to the Cape region, with a gross value of R4 million.⁸⁴ The chair at the time was Theo Hörstmann, a fourth generation descendant of the founder of the association.⁸⁵

In a survey in 1990 there were 41 commercial farms on which horticulture was practised, and 17 piggeries, dairies and chicken farms.⁸⁶ The remaining farming area after the 1960s expropriation, and which by now was declared for agricultural purposes only, covered 1 400 hectares. Altogether 23 700 metric tonnes of fresh produce was supplied to the Cape Fresh Produce Market in Epping, with 20 416 metric tonnes handled outside the market. The gross value of the produce on the Epping market in

⁸¹ Personal communication: Mrs. I. Ellmann, Philippi, 1992.

⁸² Descendants of the German settlers therefore today are also claiming expropriation damages.

⁸³ Memorandum, 1969. Cape Flats and District Farmers' Association, Church Council and School Council, Philippi.

⁸⁴ Boodskap van die Direkteur Winterreënstreek, dr. J.D. Burger, in L. Rabe, *Kaapse Vlakte- en Distrik-Boerevereniging* (1985), p. 1.

⁸⁵ L. Rabe, *Kaapse Vlakte- en Distrik-Boerevereniging* (1985), p. 8.

⁸⁶ L. Rabe, 'n *Kultuurhistoriese studie van die Duitse nedersetting Philippi*, pp. 605-606.

1990 was R9,5 million. At the time 54 % of fresh produce handled through the market came from Philippi, with 46 % of produce handled outside the market. Altogether 54 different types of vegetables were produced in the area. Up to three harvests per year can be yielded from a single field, thanks to the expert know-how of the Philippi farmers.

No comparable statistics are currently available. Yet, although the remaining part of the erstwhile much bigger Philippi agricultural area has shrunk even more because of urbanisation and other factors (it covers approximately 13 square kilometres),⁸⁷ one can argue that its strategic value to the Cape has exponentially increased.⁸⁸

A still growing population demands fresh produce at affordable prices. The remaining small area, presently comprising only about twenty active commercial farmers,⁸⁹ still produces a significant percentage of vegetables thanks to modern commercial farming methods combined with the expertise inherited from forebears.

Other favourable factors include the proximity of the area to its markets, resulting in minimal transport costs to the consumer. This, unfortunately, is also the reason for rampant urbanisation. According to the current chair, Leon Rix, this is one of the biggest threats for this important food producing area. Increasing crime is also a serious threat to its sustainability.⁹⁰

The developmental work of the agricultural association 125 years later is still a priority.⁹¹ One such example is the current support the descendants of the German immigrants, as commercial farmers, give to emerging farmers who have settled in the area during the past decade. Wadea Jappie of Chamomile Farming, who was the winner in the Small Farmers' Category: Horticultural Crops, in the Western Cape's Female Farmer of the Year competition in 2010, said that without the help of a neighbouring farmer "I would not have had success so soon. His support and knowledge of farming to me as emerging farmer is priceless."

Rix would like to see more sustainable development in the area. "I would like to see bigger government support for both emerging farmers and commercial farmers belonging to the agricultural association. We would also like to take hands with government to plan together for the development of our markets, especially in high season periods, when there is overproduction of certain vegetables."

Anton Hörstmann, a fifth generation descendant of the founder of the association and a previous chair, thinks the farmers need to be supported in their fight

⁸⁷ Personal communication: Mr. A.C.U. Hörstmann, Somerset West, 2011.

⁸⁸ L. Rabe, *Bete und Arbeite'. The Philippi Germans and their story* (2010), p. 120.

⁸⁹ Personal communication: Mr. A.C.U. Hörstmann, Somerset West, 2010.

⁹⁰ Personal communication: Mr. L. Rix, Philippi, 2010.

⁹¹ Media Release, provided by L. Rabe to Agri Western Cape, September 2010.

against crime. Although it is not a unique problem, the farmers suffer tremendous losses as a result of theft, and it is impossible to recover this from the small profit margins in vegetable cultivation.

Carl Opperman, Chief Executive Officer of Agri Western Cape, however, is positive about the future of agriculture in the area: “If one takes into account the high levels of knowledge and expertise which the members of the Cape Flats Agricultural Association have accumulated, we know that it will be one of the success factors for sustainable growth and development in that area. The farmers have proved that, despite many challenges and disappointments, they can still produce food, because they know how critical food security is for our province and our country.”⁹²

Hörstmann, who was the guest speaker at a special commemorative 125th anniversary meeting of the association on 9 September 2010, referred to those who were honoured as honorary members through the decades:

“It was always about unselfish dedication. The members have always striven to serve the community’s bigger interest rather than self-interest; serving the interests of the area, rather than their own. They were all busy people, but they all pursued the same ideal, namely the improvement of the area, and the development of agriculture. [...] It was written that agriculture cannot thrive if not organised. [...] These members also fought for the survival of the area, and collectively they worked for the advancement of the association, and thus our agricultural area and our heritage.”⁹³

The strategic value of this relatively small area, which still produces a significant percentage of fresh produce at low prices to the growing Cape population, has grown exponentially through the decades. And still the agricultural association is doing what it was established to do: to be a communal, collective voice for a community of highly productive agriculturists, and helping to find a *modus vivendi* for its members – irrespective of era or circumstances.

⁹² Media Release, provided by P. Adams, Agri Western Cape, September 2010.

⁹³ A.C.U. Hörstmann, Honorary Members and Servitude, speech delivered on special 125th anniversary meeting of the Cape Flats Agricultural Association, 2010-09-09.